

Biggest Little City in the World" (2/5)

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****Disclaimers in Part 1****

He was saved from having to apologize further by Nicky's arrival at their table. Scully's attention instantly left his side of the table.

"Here you are, ma'am," Nicky said, placing the platter of crab legs in front of Scully. (Ma'am? She thought. Her mother was a ma'am!) Her bubble burst, she put down her freshly buttered piece of bread and turned her attention to the delicious crab in front of her.

"Can I get you all anything else?" Nicky the waiter asked politely. Scully looked up to answer, and noticed that the cute waiter's eyes were glued to Mulder's face. A fact that Mulder was obviously quite aware of, as well.

"No, that'll do it. Thanks." He glanced at Scully, hoping for some help, and saw none forthcoming. He knew that he would probably have to hear about this, too.

"Well, Scully. I can't speak for the sheriff in Chaney, but I bet I can hazard a guess as to why our friend Nicky the waiter is buck-toothed."

"Shut up and eat, Mulder," she replied, not even looking up. Great. Mulder had even managed to screw up her flirtation with the waiter. Showing up out of the blue was one thing, but having the cute waiter check out her partner instead of her was something she was entirely unprepared to deal with. She grabbed a crab leg and began wrenching it with the shell cracker on her plate. She didn't know how, but she would make Mulder pay for this.

"You know, Mulder. I have about had it withâ€|" Scully stared at her partner in disbelief. Sure, she had been a little curious when he had ordered the side of mayonnaise. However, once it arrived, she couldn't believe what Mulder started to do. He took six slices of bread from the basket on the table. He carefully covered each slice in the same amount of mayonnaise. Then, he proceeded to arrange the small bay shrimp he had ordered on one slice. Once this was done, he squeezed a lemon quarter over the shrimp, trying to cover the shrimp evenly. He then put a second piece of bread on top, and moved it to one side of his plate, and began the process again with another two slices.

Mulder looked up at Scully. "What?" He asked, curious as to what the hell she thought was so interesting on his side of the table, while her steamed crab sat there, untouched. "Aren't you gonna eat your lunch?"

"Dare I ask what you are doing?" She ventured.

"I told you, they better have shrimp sandwiches. They didn't, so I am improvising. Didn't you pay attention at the last team building seminar?" He replied.

"Sort ofâ€|but how do you get from solving puzzles in 8 moves or less to make-shift shrimp sandwiches? I fail to see the logic."

"Gee, now there's a first. Usually, you're all about logic."

She decided not to dignify that with an answer. She turned her attention to her crab legs and looked out over the Bay, chewing thoughtfully. But, soon it was too much for her. He had three perfect little shrimp sandwiches stacked on his plate, and was getting ready to make a fourth. "Damn it, Mulder, are you going to eat them or just sit there and build them until you run out of shrimp?"

"My, aren't we a little 'crabby' today?" He replied with a crooked grin.

It's the beer, she told herself. He'd ordered a bottle of Anchor Steam, and she was certain that it was going straight to his head. Again, she found herself wishing he'd never shown up. He must have read her mind.

"Scully, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"Why did you just up and leave without telling me where or why you were going. Was it something I did?" He looked up with that petulant look on his face.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that while it certainly wasn't the only reason, needing some time away from him had been a small part of it. "Mulder, Iâ€|" she couldn't think of what to say. She knew she could easily tell him a lie, but that he would never believe it. But the truth wasn't exactly kind. "Promise me, you won't get angry when I tell you?"

"What good would getting angry do? I am not the one with a 9 mm handgun on my person," he smirked, trying to lighten his partner's

mood.

"I'm serious, Mulder. It wasn't anything you said. But, being around you â€" around any single person, for that matter â€" for any extended period of time can wear on my nerves, quickly. Mulder, I haven't had a 'break' from you for 5 years that you haven't known my whole itinerary. You always called or showed up at the worst possible moment. Okay, sometimes, it was the best possible moment, but you know what I mean. I needed some time away from my life. I didn't even bring my cellular, Mulder. And I almost didn't tell my own mother where I was going. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Before Mulder could answer, Nicky reappeared at their table. "How you two doing? Everything OK?"

"Yeah, just great," Mulder answered, his cheeks reddening.

"We're fine," Scully added, not even looking up from her plate.

"Great! Be sure to let me know if you need anything else," Nicky said, noting that it seemed to have dropped a few degrees at that table. And if the redhead's looks could kill, that poor guy across from her would be dead and gone.

Regrouping his thoughts, Mulder looked across the table at Scully. "I do understand what you are saying. But you have to understand where I am coming from. I have spent my whole adult life losing people, and running after them. No one ever bothers to tell me not to follow, I just do. I worry about the people close to me. And if they up and disappear on me, I assume it's something I did. I'm a fixer, Scully. I have to make right what I have messed up. Don't tell me you haven't read "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus"! I was certain that was required reading for your gender." He stared at her, waiting to see if his attempt at humor had been successful.

"So was "The Bridges of Madison County", but I have somehow managed to avoid that one, too," she answered, wryly.

Mulder grinned widely. Good, she wasn't going to crucify him after all. He was about to make some crack about "The Horse Whisperer" when Nicky reappeared, bearing the check. Mulder suddenly found himself squirming in his seat. On the other side of the table, Scully swallowed a grin, amused at her partner's obvious discomfort at the waiter's presence. It was all she could do to stop herself from laughing out loud when Nicky turned his million-watt smile to Mulder and handed him the check.

"No hurry, you just stay here as long as you want. If you need anything at all, please just wave me down."

Mulder snatched the check and put it on the edge of the table. "Yeah, thanks."

Scully shook her head. It occurred to her that they could be the only diners in here, and she could stand on the table, yelling and stripping off her clothes, and she would fail to get even a second look out of this guy. But today, in a crowded restaurant full of noisy diners, all Mulder had to do was look up and the waiter was at their table in a flash. It was pretty much useless to try and flirt

with the cute waiters in San Francisco. At least, if you are female.

Embarrassed, Mulder turned his attention to his plate, and began munching on one of his creations. He could only imagine how pissed Scully was right now. Of course, were the tables turned, he wouldn't be pissed at all. If a good looking female waitress were to come over and flirt with Scully, the image alone would keep him going for days. He decided the best course of action would be to keep this little tidbit to himself. He guessed that Scully had quite a backhand on her, and he didn't want to find out the hard way.

They stuck to small talk as they ate their meal, only commenting on the weather, the people three tables down with the screaming toddler, and offering each other tastes of their food.

Finally, they were done, and it was time to pay the check. Mulder got out his government credit card, and slowly placed it on the check. "Call the waiter over, Scully. I am gonna hit the head."

"Thanks for the update. You could always send him over yourself. The wait station is right next to the bathrooms." Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

Scully wasn't quite sure what it was Mulder mouthed at her, but she was fairly certain it had nothing to do with a duck or a female sheep.

No sooner had Mulder stepped away from the table, then Nicky appeared, swooping in and grabbing the bill and credit card. "Can I get you one last refill on that soda, ma'am?"

Scully grimaced. "No, I am fine, thanks." She just wished the little punk would go away. He'd pretty much taken all the fun out of her lunch.

"Be right back for your friend's signature," Nicky said, emphasizing the word friend, to see if she would react. Without really giving her time to answer, he scurried off to the cash register.

Scully sat staring out the water, wishing she'd thought of some snappy comeback that implied she and Mulder were more than friends. Right now, the thought of watching his finely chiseled little face fall like a ruined soufflé tickled her to no end.

Mulder arrived back at the table just as Nicky was approaching with the sales draft and Mulder's card. "OK, Mr. Mulder, I just need your signature, and the yellow copy is all yours."

Scully's eyebrow shot up. Mr. Mulder. She tried not to giggle as she imagined what the waiter must have thought at seeing Mulder's first name. It was too funny.

Without looking up, Mulder took the proffered pen and signed the slip, handing the white back to the waiter and putting his card back in his wallet. He stuffed the yellow copy in his jacket pocket and looked at Scully. "Let's go."

"You folks have a good day, and come back soon!" Nicky called after them.

Mulder just raised his hand in a polite wave, not even turning around, and followed Scully to the door. Halfway there, he pulled out the receipt, wanting to move it to his wallet. It would be going on his next expense report. He couldn't believe what he saw when he looked at the thin piece of yellow paper. Nicky had written his phone number on it! Area code and all. Crumpling it up quickly, his eyes darted around, looking for the nearest trash can. He found it, directly next to the bench Scully was waiting for him on. He hooked his arm up, and the ball of paper sailed over his partner's head and landed neatly in the trash.

"Nothin' but net," he muttered to himself.

"What was that?" Scully asked. She could have sworn it looked like receipt paper. She couldn't imagine that Mulder, cheap bastard that he was, would give up a receipt he could claim on an expense report.

"Nothing, it was nothing. Let's rock and roll, Scully."

"I can't believe the waiter hit on you," Scully mumbled as got up from the bench.

"Must be my natural magnetism showing again." Mulder pulled one of his "joke" smiles, then looked over to see his partner walking along—well, trudging was more like it, with a dejected look on her face. "What, were you hoping to claim him for yourself?"

"Of course not," she replied quickly, too quickly for Mulder to take her answer seriously.

"If it would make you feel better, do you want me to go back in there and tell him that he wasn't my type but if he wants to explore bisexuality he can give you a call?" She opened her mouth to deliver a "Shut up, Mulder," but couldn't get the words out when she visualized Mulder going back into the restaurant, and laughed instead.

"Was that the purpose of the trip, to pick up strangers? If so," he paused before continuing. "You could probably do a lot better than a waiter. And a gay one at that."

The good feeling she'd gotten from picturing Mulder back in the restaurant deflated with his last comment. How would he know she could do a lot better? Hell, it had been so long, she wasn't even sure she knew if she could do better. She couldn't even indulge in harmless vacation-flirting because Mulder was there. Not that that was the point of the trip — if she had to travel across the country to hit on people, she was in bad shape. She walked along, trying to stifle the resentment that had started to build again, then stopped when a bizarre sound hit her ears. "Mulder?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you hear—barking? Not dog barking, but—it's definitely—barking."

He stopped, listened for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. It is barking." After a quick glance around, he pointed to a sign. "There's

your answer," he said, gesturing to a brightly painted sign with a sea lion on it and the words "Follow Salty To See The California Sea Lions." "Oh. Sea lions. Okay." She was relieved she wasn't hearing things. "Let's go take a look. After that meal, I could use a walk." After a few turns around buildings, they walked to the edge of the pier. Directly below them was a platform in the water with what looked like thirty sea lions piled on it, lying on top of each other. One would let out the occasional barking sound, but their main activity seemed to be crawling around on top of each other to jockey for position and lounging in the sun.

Scully and Mulder stared down at them for several minutes without speaking. "That's what separates us from them," she said, pointing down to the sea lions. "Can you ever imagine that many people lying on top of each other like that?"

"Only if five of them were Baywatch actresses and the others were horny drunk guys." She flipped him the "we-are-not-amused" look, complete with eyebrow, that usually made him grin and offer a half-hearted apology for a stupid comment, but he was still staring down, oblivious to her. She opted not to comment directly, trying to be pleasant, and said, "Don't they look relaxed?" He studied them intently. "Yeah, that's the perfect word for it. They look relaxed, like they don't have a care in the world."

Like they don't have a care in the world. Relaxed. Maybe they're on vacation, she thought sarcastically. That's what vacationing is supposed to do to you, relax you. I'm not relaxed. Stupid sea lions are relaxed, I'm not. I was relaxed before, earlier in the day. In the gym, having breakfast, in the bathtub, all of those were fantastic. And they were all while I was alone.

She tried to shake the thoughts out of her head, but it wouldn't happen. This was the time she'd normally head off to the gym, to work out her frustrations through exercise. Not possible now — Mulder knew she'd already been to the gym in the morning, and twice in one day wouldn't go unnoticed. Besides, if she suddenly looked up and said, "Sorry Mulder, gotta go to the gym immediately," he'd think she was insane. Her hands gripped the railing until her knuckles turned white as she tried to think happy thoughts. Happy thoughts that didn't involve Mulder joining the sea lions in the water.

Mulder glanced down at his partner and noticed her focused, icy stare. He decided whatever she had on her mind was bothering her, and standing on a pier quietly looking out over the bay wouldn't get her mind off it. They needed another activity. "C'mon, Scully, let's go. Let's walk around for a while." He took a few steps away, then waited for her to follow him.

They walked side by side, Mulder looking into the stores, commenting on people walking by, hoping to say something to get his partner's mind off whatever she was thinking about. He stopped suddenly and pointed across the promenade. "Scully, look!"

Without looking, she noted the happy tone in his voice. "What?"

"Bumper cars. When was the last time you saw those?" He pointed across to an old-fashioned open building.

Bumper cars. Impossible. She glanced over in the direction of his pointing and confirmed that, yes, he was pointing at bumper cars. Her mind flashed back to being younger, going on bumper cars with her brothers and how they proceeded to ram into each other until one of their parents would stop them, fearing for their safety. She smiled and said a quick thank you to whatever force had put the bumper cars there for her. Now there was only one thing left to do. "Mulder, you up for a little ride?" She hoped his interest hadn't been just curiosity at the old-fashioned ride. If it was, she'd just have to force him into a car, by whatever means necessary.

"You want to? I haven't done this in years, decades even. Sure, let's go." They walked over to the building, both of them smiling, both for completely different reasons.

Pausing only to hand over the fare, almost tossing it into the ticket taker's hand, Scully moved quickly to the nearest car and settled in. Twenty minutes for \$2.00. Small price to pay for her mental well-being. She looked around for her partner, finding him scrutinizing the cars. "Mulder, what are you doing?"

"Trying to decide what color I want," he replied.

Typical Mulder, she thought. She called out, "At least none of them are rental-car blue, white or gray" while thinking, hurry up and get in a damn car before I mow you down.

"Good point. Oh, look, red." He jumped into the car and fastened the safety belt as Scully stepped on the pedal. He started to inch forward, then looked over to see her barreling towards him with the mother of all determined looks on her face. As he tried to swerve to the left, she slammed into him hard enough to make him bump out of the seat. "Jesus, Scully."

"Sorry, Mulder, you snooze you lose," she called as she backed up and turned. I feel much better now, she thought. That was for Nicky the waiter, denying me the chance to talk to him. Not the first time he's done that, though. She maneuvered herself into the position she wanted, directly behind him, then accelerated as fast as the car could go.

Mulder never saw her coming. He jerked forward again on impact, and whipped his head around. "Scully, at least give me a chance to get started!"

That was for the sheriff in Texas, she thought. "Well, hurry up!"

He started the car, then got hit with another full-force assault from Scully. "You do know that car turns in other directions, right?"

"Does it?" she replied as she backed up and ran into him again.

"Quit it!" he yelled, thinking I have got to get away from this wall.

For Detective White, she thought. "Who else am I supposed to hit?"

It'd be rude to ram into strangers, wouldn't it?"

"Depends on how cute the strangers were," he shot back. He felt another bump immediately. "I deserved that one, didn't I?"

"That one and more, Mulder. Much more."

At that point, Mulder knew he was in serious trouble. "Scullyâ€¦ when was the last time you did this?"

"When I was twelve, why?"

"Okay. So you're sort of out of practice?"

She pulled up beside him. "You're asking me that after I've hit you how many times?"

She had a point. Not that he'd admit it. "Justâ€¦ let me get into position so we can have a fair fight, okay?"

Reasonable enough request. She nodded assent. He moved forward, saying "God, these things have worse steering than those motor pool cars."

Not if you know how to use 'em, she thought as she snuck one last unguarded assault in. For the bug thing in Olympia Forest. He protested loudly while she shrugged, implying "hey, I couldn't resist."

She stalled in the car while she waited patiently for him to move across the length of the bumper car track. He turned the car, then they faced each other. He pretended to have a look of concentration on his face, partly to kid around but mainly because she saw how intent she was. Primary goal, avoid getting chucked out of the seat. Secondary goal, at least sideswipe her.

He started forward as she decided, if I sideswipe him and make him jump, this one's for the New Mexico thing. If it's a head on, the Arctic Circle. They charged towards each other straight on, then Scully swerved to the right a few feet before they collided. With another sharp pull of wheel back, she managed to plow into the side of his car. He struggled to stay upright as she screamed, "Yeah!" and banged her hand against the wheel. Her scream attracted the attention of several passers-by who stopped to stare at the attractive little redhead sitting in the bumper car laughing herself silly.

Mulder was dazed by the last hit. However, one thing was abundantly clear â€" for whatever reason, Scully really needed the release that plowing into him was giving her. Against his better nature that warned him against looking like a fool, he thought it might be best to let her get it out of her system. Knowing if she were aware that he was letting her win would piss her off further, he rammed into her while she was still laughing.

A loud yelp escaped as she felt the impact. She looked over at her grinning partner. "Nice hit, Mulderâ€¦ but you're toast now." She started to back up, letting her wicked grin flash at Mulder as he moved in the opposite direction. As they had the run of the bumper car field, they took a long time getting to the opposite sides of the track before they faced each other again.

By this time a small crowd of people were gathered around to watch the two seemingly grown-up people go at each other. Mulder and Scully were unaware of the people, focusing only on the goal at hand. Mulder watched, almost fascinated as she pulled ahead with the look on her face he usually associated for dealing with suspects "no bullshit. She has brothers, he thought, they probably did this a lot. I know they fought a lot, so she doesn't fight like a girl. Apparently she doesn't drive a bumper car like one either. She has a technique here. He took a quick look to make sure the seat belt was still secure, then headed towards her again.

By the time their twenty minutes were up, the man in the crowd keeping score estimated that Mulder had managed three good knocks against her, and there were two head-ons that looked like draws. However, with seven highly effective runs against Mulder, it was clear that Scully had won the battle. Each time they had careened into each other, the crowd had gasped or cheered, but the combatants weren't aware they had an audience until they got out of the cars. Turning towards the noise of the clapping, they looked at the cluster of people, at each other in confused amazement, then back at the crowd. Mulder managed a fake-limp as he walked over to her, making her laugh. "Nice match, Killer," he said as he held out his hand.

"Thanks," she said, laughing still. They walked toward the exit, Mulder noticing a little bit of spring in his partner's step as she walked. She was obviously much happier. Unorthodox method of making her happy, but hey whatever worked.

He rubbed the back of his neck as they walked. "What's the matter, Mulder, did I give you whiplash?" she smirked.

He decided she might have been enjoying it a little too much. "Does our medical through the Bureau cover bumper car-related chiropractic care?"

"Probably not, but considering some of the other reasons you've needed medical attention, bumper car injury would seem perfectly normal," she said as they walked toward the street.

"What are you implying, Scully?"

"Nothing. Just that I can only imagine what the claims adjuster thought about 'attacked by the Jersey Devil' on the insurance form."

They slowed down as a couple cut in front of them, then stopped suddenly. Scully & Mulder watched as the couple smiled at each other, then hugged and kissed. They both stared at the couple in slight disgust, and muttered simultaneously, "Get a room."

Since their comment was audible only to each other, they stared straight ahead, not daring to look at one another as the couple moved away from them. Scully managed to sneak a look up at Mulder as he cleared his throat and glanced around. "Underwater World," he said, gesturing to the left. "What's that?"

"Oh, I read about it at the hotel. It's an aquarium where everything's basically swimming around you, rather than standing in

front of a glass tank. It's supposed to be really nice."

"Sounds cool. Wanna check it out?" he asked, safe in the knowledge Scully was now content enough that he didn't have to worry about her trying to feed him to the sharks.

"Sure."

Scully looked up at him as they walked toward the ticket booth, then cleared her throat to get his attention. "Mulder?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you let me pay for this? It's the least I can do after you paid for lunch."

Mulder nodded, slightly surprised. Her mood swing was so dramatic that he almost said a thank you prayer to whomever had invented bumper cars...if they made her this happy, it had to have been worth it. Feeling the twinge in his neck again, he revised his previous thought as she handed him a ticket.

They followed the signs to a small, dimly lit elevator decorated to look like a freight lift on a cargo ship. This could be hokey, she thought grimly. Mulder, on the other hand, seemed pleased by the design effort. The elevator started to move as Mulder said, "Going down?"

Scully's eyebrow rose.

"I didn't mean it like that, I swear to you. I was going to follow up with 'First floor, sporting goods, sea life,'" Mulder said quickly.

"Uh huh." She refused to let Mulder's double entendres ruin the good mood she was in. Only one thing could spoil it was being lectured to by a tour guide in a scuba suit.

To her relief, the doors opened to reveal two men in khaki pants and purple polo shirts, gesturing towards a dark circular room. She led the way, peering into each glass container carefully to study the creatures swimming inside. Mulder leaned over her shoulder to watch the movement in the tanks, moving on to each subsequent tank faster than his partner, so he was through with the room before she had moved halfway around it. He waited patiently for her to finish, biding his time by reading a pamphlet left by the elevator, then they moved towards a large doorway.

Stepping through, they found themselves at the beginning of a long cylindrical passageway, moving walkway at their feet, thick glass all around them separating them from the water. Over their heads, various sizes and shapes of sea life swam. They looked up simultaneously, Mulder emitting a low "Cool" while Scully sucked in her breath. They stepped onto the walkway, taking slow looks around as the conveyor inched forward.

Mulder pointed to a long gray object cruising past his left shoulder. "That is the ugliest fish I've ever seen."

Scully looked at it for a moment. "Oh, it's a sturgeon ."

Mulder smiled. Of course she knew what it was. While it was occasionally nice having a partner that knew every fact there was to know, he worried that this excursion would be like spending time with his junior high science teacher.

"You're right, though, that is an ugly little sucker."

Maybe she wouldn't be like his science teacher after all.

End
file.